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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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**THE SECOND COLD WAR:  
AIRSEA BATTLE AND THE STRUGGLE FOR POWER**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

**MAJOR KYLE SMET**

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## *Executive Summary*

**Title:** The Second Cold War: AirSea Battle and the Struggle for Power

**Author:** Major Kyle Smet, United States Air Force

**Thesis:** Commonalities between air and sea power outlined in AirSea Battle enable a robust partnership in the Pacific to counterbalance China's rise to military dominance; however, the forward-deployed, assertive concept of operations threatens to mirror the post-World War II military build-up and tension that lasted throughout the Cold War.

**Discussion:** AirSea Battle is a concept of operations designed to counterbalance China's economic and military expansion into the Western Pacific Theater of Operations. While not an overt declaration of hostilities, the AirSea Battle concept outlines the grave risks associated with China's Anti-Access/Area Denial capabilities that threaten to shift the balance of power and influence in the Pacific. Enduring success, as outlined by AirSea Battle, is contingent on a number of recommendations designed to capitalize on the strengths and experiences of the armed services over the past decade such as (1) integrated Army presence in the Western Pacific Theater of Operations, (2) a thorough multi-service and coalition training plan that emphasizes a denied or degraded environment, and (3) the reinforcement and protection of island ports and airfields with an emphasis on cost effectiveness, robust defense and dispersal options. This study delineates specific strengths and weaknesses of AirSea Battle, offers three recommendations, and concludes with a warning that the potential military and technological build-up may closely mirror the Cold War environment. While the United States and the Soviet Union avoided force-on-force conflict during the Cold War, the alarming prospect of a full-scale battle existed in tandem with respective military build-up. AirSea Battle is an appropriate concept but must continue to adapt in order to properly align American counterbalancing with China's Anti-Access/Area Denial capabilities.

**Conclusion:** China's rise to power and regional dominance represents an existent threat to the power projection and force sustainment capabilities of the US. While AirSea Battle may transform over time, a counter-balancing concept of operations is necessary to offset emerging Chinese capabilities while synergizing the combined strengths of American military forces.

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## *Preface*

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### *The End of the Cold War*

On 3 December 1989, just three weeks after the fall of the Berlin Wall, President George Bush and Russian President Mikhail Gorbachev met on the Mediterranean island of Malta to formally declare an end to the Cold War.<sup>1</sup> During the Malta Summit, President Gorbachev announced “the world is leaving one epoch and entering another. We are at the beginning of a long road to a lasting, peaceful era. The threat of force, mistrust, psychological and ideological struggle should all be things of the past.”<sup>2</sup>

As a global power with the ability to project and sustain military and diplomatic presence worldwide, the United States reaffirmed its goals by pledging to defend democratic nations and policies, preserve access to strategic trading partners and vital resources, and strengthen partnerships with key allies.<sup>3</sup> Enforcement of foreign policies were put to the test during the limited wars in Korea and Vietnam, and America’s defense of strategic allied nations was demonstrated in the Persian Gulf during the large-scale build-up and troop deployment of Operations DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM in 1991. In the decade following the dissolution and collapse of the Soviet Union, America’s global dominance remained unchallenged.

Yet everything changed on 11 September 2001 when terrorists attacked the United States with the goals of eradicating American presence in the Persian Gulf and promulgating an extreme form of *caliphate* throughout the Middle East. As a result of the attacks, American foreign policy rhetoric emphasized the threat of terrorism and Islamic extremism. Specifically, the United States focused its efforts towards determined and enigmatic adversaries scattered throughout the globe. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and numerous other federal agencies



drafted updated strategies to counter emerging breeds of global threats. The “evil empire” of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) morphed into a myriad of rogue nation states, terrorist groups, and non-state actors. The transition from one adversary to many proved to be a lengthy and complicated process.

In order to preserve the security and sovereignty of the United States and its allies, President George Bush launched a military campaign in Afghanistan designed to subvert the Taliban regime and destroy terrorist training camps. In 2003, American troops were deployed to Iraq to rid the country of suspected weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and end the despotic regime of Saddam Hussein while the State Department prepared the groundwork for a stable democratic society. Despite the many successes and failures of Operations ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF) and IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF), the United States found itself in the midst of a protracted and expensive war on two fronts. As American forces began the withdrawal from Iraq and continued to provide security and provincial assistance in Afghanistan, estimates of the cost to support ongoing combat and support operations exceeded 1.3 trillion US Dollars.<sup>4</sup>

On 3 January 2012, President Barack Obama released *Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Defense* which announced that America was “at a moment of transition” as a result of extreme national debt and the global financial condition.<sup>5</sup> In the document, he outlined a strategy with armed services that would be “smaller and leaner” and would “continue to contribute to security globally, (but) *will of necessity rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region.*”<sup>6</sup> While the US and the rest of the world reevaluated economic priorities, long-term defense strategies, and foreign policy,

the People's Republic of China (PRC) garnered unprecedented economic growth and capital.

Based on rapidly expanding capital and international trade coupled with technological enterprises and foreign policy initiatives, the PRC is building its military systems at an extraordinary rate. As a result of China's expansion, its sociopolitical and economic dominance will challenge the United States' position as the world's leading superpower in the coming decades.<sup>7</sup> The alliance between the United States and Taiwan, as well as growing US military presence in the Pacific, further exacerbates regional political strain. While the diplomatic instrument of power is making progress, US military planners continue to prepare for long-term contingencies.

To counterbalance China's political, economic, and military rise in the Pacific region, Pacific Air Forces (PACAF), the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA), and the Pentagon's Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) drafted AirSea Battle (ASB).<sup>8</sup> The ASB concept is a collaborative measure to synergize Air Force and Navy capabilities for a robust defense and attack network throughout the Pacific region. Despite separate doctrine, military methodologies, questions over regional leadership, and the conspicuous absence of Army elements, commonalities between air and sea power outlined in ASB enable a robust partnership in the Pacific to counterbalance the PRC's rise to military dominance. However, the forward-deployed, assertive concept threatens to mirror post-World War II military build-up and tension that lasted throughout the Cold War; therefore, this study outlines three recommendations to quell the disadvantages of ASB while ensuring its success and sustainment in a fiscally constrained environment.

### *AirSea Battle – An Overview*

In September 2009, US Air Force Chief of Staff General Norton Schwartz and US Navy Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Gary Roughead signed a classified memorandum to begin design, research, and execution of an operational concept labeled AirSea Battle.<sup>9</sup> The Pentagon recognized the regional requirements needed to maintain Pacific stability while counterbalancing Chinese production of anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) abilities that threatened established US forward presence and power projection capabilities.<sup>10</sup> The Western Pacific and East Asia regions historically have been areas of significant American interest; thus, the United States prepared a concept of operations to ensure the military and political balance of power did not become unfavorable.

The substance of the ASB concept of operations (CONOPS) lies in two fundamental stages. The first stage begins upon declaration of hostilities or commencement of a formal state of opposition and involves four initial lines of operation (LOOs) in parallel: (1) withstand initial attacks and limit damage to forces, (2) execute a blinding campaign against enemy battle networks and ISR systems, (3) execute a missile suppression campaign against long-range strike systems, and (4) seize the air, sea, space, and cyber initiative.<sup>11</sup> The second stage mandates that the United States will execute follow-on pursuit operations and initiatives as part of a strategy for a prolonged conflict.<sup>12</sup> As part of this stage, American and allied forces will sustain and exploit the initiative in all warfighting domains, conduct distant blockade operations, maintain operational logistics, and reallocate industrial production to adequately maintain logistics flow to the region.<sup>13</sup>

One of the necessary themes of ASB describes China's growing technological and

military components in the Western Pacific Theater of Operations (WPTO); therefore, ASB specifically addresses high-end military operations.<sup>14</sup> Unlike ongoing operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Chinese People's Liberation Army's (PLA) rapidly improving and complex A2/AD systems pose a credible and growing threat to regional stability. To counter accusations of aggressive military build-up, Chinese military strategists describe China's military forces as having a "defensive defense policy," implying that its military technological advancements are inherently meant for self-protection.<sup>15</sup> General Zhang Nanqi added that "we do not want war, but we should be prepared to fight to defend our national interests."<sup>16</sup> He further stipulated that "national defense construction... reflects the needs of our national security in peacetime and serves as the guiding principle for military development and for the development of our national defense in the new era."<sup>17</sup> As China's economy develops, PLA strategists suggest that A2/AD capabilities are a natural extension of technological enterprises.

In the unlikely event of war, the CSBA suggests that Eastern military strategy will execute rapid and preemptive attacks to inflict massive damage on US Pacific forces to include the disruption of command and control (C2) networks, interruption or blockage of operational logistical flow, and promulgation of America's inability to defend its allies.<sup>18</sup> Once China achieves these goals, the United States would have to choose between paying the potentially prohibitive cost to regain regional stability or abandoning the warfighting effort altogether.<sup>19</sup> The ASB concept addresses the dichotomy between China's purported interest in peace and America's pursuit for counterbalance.

Several key assumptions carry over into both phases of the ASB concept. The first assumption is that the United States will not initiate armed hostilities and any tactical

warning from Chinese aggression will be limited.<sup>20</sup> The CONOPS contends that Chinese and US territories will not be held as sanctuaries and the space domain, as with all domains, will be contested.<sup>21</sup> Finally, ASB asserts that Australia and Japan will remain active and effective coalition partners with access to key ports and land bases throughout the region.<sup>22</sup> Key ASB objectives include denial of a quick victory to the adversary, avoiding a prolonged or costly war that may sway public opinion and diminish support for the effort, and preventing such damage to military infrastructure that the United States would discontinue to fight.<sup>23</sup>

The vastness of the WPTO combined with the geophysical challenges of the Pacific demand a premium on range and endurance. The United States maintains only a few land bases that are large and virtually undefended.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, many of these bases are either too close to China or too far away to adequately defend and logistically maintain. Due to the size and unique Pacific island geography, ASB synergizes operations between Air Force fighters, bombers, missiles, and tankers with Navy carrier and land-based aircraft as well as submarines and surface launched missiles.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, multiple airfields and points of debarkation are necessary throughout the region to prevent devastating attacks while encouraging freedom of movement.

Finally, and most importantly, mutual nuclear deterrence remains in the best interests of all nations and resides as an implied element within the CONOPS. The threat or usage of nuclear weapons would alter “the character of the conflict... so dramatically as to render discussion of major conventional warfare irrelevant.”<sup>26</sup> Sub-space detonation of nuclear weapons for the purpose of creating an electromagnetic pulse (EMP) to disrupt and deny C2 and other key elements across the electromagnetic spectrum remains a

viable threat. Nevertheless, the nature of conflict as outlined in ASB remains conventional.

### ***Why AirSea Battle? – A Comprehensive Examination***

Upon examination, ASB is a concept intended to counterbalance the Chinese military and political emergence of power in the Pacific while maintaining American regional status and prominence. Likewise, the CONOPS is not intended to provoke conflict, hawkishly assert regional dominance, and promulgate American warmongering. Yet beneath the surface, ASB has the potential to become the harbinger of an emerging Cold War-like national strategy tailored to the dynamic fiscal and geopolitical realities of the twenty-first century by identifying an adversary by country instead of outlining a broader regional focus.

Debate still exists whether nuclear deterrence and mutually assured destruction were key elements during the Cold War that contributed to keep the world free of nuclear war. While the United States and the Soviet Union avoided force-on-force conflict during the Cold War, the alarming prospect of a full-scale battle existed in tandem with respective military build-up and a broadening nuclear arsenal. Proxy wars in Korea and Vietnam tested America's resiliency and political will, while the Cuban Missile Crisis brought the two global superpowers to a tense and potentially perilous situation in which the Soviet Government claimed that "the armaments and military equipment sent to Cuba are designed exclusively for *defensive purposes*."<sup>27</sup> Chinese strategist Jiang Zemin similarly compared the challenges of the Cold War with Chinese national security by explaining that "ethnic, religious, and territorial disputes that were covered up by the rivalry between the United States and the USSR have become more prominent by the

day, with bloody conflicts and local wars continuing to spread.”<sup>28</sup> The Cold War was free from overt conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, but decades of mistrust and acrimony took their toll on each nation’s economy, politics, and military force structure.

Author Andrew Scobell expanded on the ideology of Chinese military thought into what he termed the “Chinese Cult of Defense.”<sup>29</sup> He classified his hypothesis as follows:

Chinese elites believe passionately in the existence of a unique defensive, conflict-averse Chinese military approach to interstate relations. Coexisting alongside this – but rarely explicitly acknowledged by leaders and researchers – is a realist outlook that readily sanctions the use of violence in statecraft. The resultant mixture of these two outlooks is a worldview that rationalizes the use of force, even when used in an offensive capacity, as a purely defensive measure. The combined effect is paradoxical: While most of China’s leaders, analysts, and researchers believe profoundly that the legacy of Chinese civilization is fundamentally pacifist, they are nevertheless very willing to employ force when confronting crises.<sup>30</sup>

China’s claims of a defensive posture should be tempered by their expansion of military technology. AirSea Battle is a suitable concept but must continue to adapt in order to properly align American counterbalancing with China’s A2/AD capabilities. The concept does not describe the containment of China or delineate the incitement of war, but rather it complements an “offsetting strategy” designed to stabilize the Pacific balance of power and maintain crisis stability in East Asia.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the fundamental concept of ASB serves to reassure Pacific nations that China would fail to achieve its military objectives should war become a reality.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, the US intends to prove that the cost of war would outweigh the benefits.

In order to understand Chinese commitment to technological and A2/AD advancements, it is necessary to examine Eastern philosophy and strategy in a historical context. As Sun Tzu explained in opening text of *The Art of War*, “war is a matter of vital importance to the State; the province of life or death; the road to survival or ruin.”<sup>33</sup> A key concept of the PLA strategy combines Western technological advances with Eastern wisdom to embody the axiom that “the skillful warriors first made themselves invincible and awaited the enemy’s moment of vulnerability.”<sup>34</sup> It is these instruments of invincibility that comprise the conceptual *Shashou Jian*, or ancient Chinese “Assassin’s Mace,” that was concealed and employed with little warning.<sup>35</sup> PRC strategists explain that the concept of *Shashou Jian* is the methodology to deter or defeat a superior adversary through the unexpected and overwhelming use of force. As General Haung Bin described, “We can fight a war with (the United States, but) they will not be able to continue the war after a while. Moreover, we also have our *Shashou Jian*.”<sup>36</sup>

But what capabilities are defined through the adage of *Shashou Jian*? Perhaps the most damaging weapon to America’s power projection and force deployment capability is China’s ongoing effort to maintain the capability to destroy US aircraft carriers.<sup>37</sup> The growing range of PLA systems combined with the technological advances of anti-satellite and electro-magnetic weapons, cruise missiles, submarines, unmanned aerial vehicles, and fourth generation fighter aircraft demonstrate that the PRC is actively seeking the means to expand their regional power and influence.<sup>38</sup> The nature of *Shashou Jian* is centrally preemptive and employed with little warning, and therefore assets of the American military arsenal such as aircraft carriers would be held to risk or deployed at a range which would render them virtually ineffective. Finally, China may mirror Soviet-



style capabilities employed during the Cold War, such as the mass utilization of submarines, anti-ship ballistic missiles, and strike aircraft.<sup>39</sup>

China's combination of Eastern philosophical strategy with Western technology and Soviet tactics demand the utmost attention and scrutiny. The *Shashou Jian* proverb is culturally and militarily germane to Eastern warfare methodology and oftentimes runs counter to American candid and outspoken rhetoric. Specifically, the United States disclosed the size and disposition of its nuclear arsenal in 2010 in an effort to inspire other countries to be more forthright about their own capabilities.<sup>40</sup> As of 2012, China's operational nuclear capabilities, both regional and strategic, remain unidentified and can only be estimated.<sup>41</sup> However, a Department of Defense official explained that China is attempting to "strengthen its deterrent capability by moving from vulnerable silo-based, liquid-fueled, long-range ballistic missiles to ones that are much more survivable – mobile solid-propellant."<sup>42</sup> PRC strategists conform to Sun Tzu's renowned maxim that "all warfare is based on deception" and therefore continue to cloak many of their warfighting capabilities behind a veil of secrecy.<sup>43</sup>

### ***The Way Ahead***

While ASB is still in its infancy and subject to necessary modifications and amendments, the CONOPS contains numerous operational gaps and controversial omissions that require closer examination. With a focus on technology and A2/AD capabilities, the ASB concept is centrally distinctive compared to ongoing operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Specifically, three separate recommendations are necessary in order to improve the efficacy of ASB:

- (1) Ensure a continuing Army presence in the theater of operations

(2) Initiate a meticulous training regime with matched capabilities throughout the Air Force and Navy

(3) Bolster and reinforce current island sanctuaries while developing dispersal bases to surrounding islands with a focus on cost effectiveness, strategic location, and robust capability

Perhaps the most glaring ASB exclusion is the absence of Army units. While the CONOPS focuses on the world's largest ocean, many strategists question the lack of ground-based troops to maintain power balance in the Pacific. Joint Publication 3-0, *Joint Operations*, stipulates that "fundamental keystone constructs – such as unified action and joint functions... apply regardless of the nature or circumstances of a specific joint operation."<sup>44</sup> Similarly, joint doctrine mandates that "effective collaboration enhances C2 by sharing knowledge and aiding the creation of shared understanding (which) improve long-distance, asynchronous collaboration among dispersed forces."<sup>45</sup> Limited budgets and shrinking force structure only serve to strengthen the synergistic nature of the military that, through doctrinal definition, is a joint fighting force. The lack of Army units from ASB is a perplexing omission because land-based forces must hold and defend territory to enable port and airfield security while maintaining ground and establishing American presence.

Many pundits lament that ASB focuses on "systems and platforms (with) no recognition of the Army's role – particularly with regard to developing basing rights, transit rights, all those things that allow the air and naval elements to move around and do those things they want to do in the *AirSea* concept."<sup>46</sup> Army planners argue that the Navy and Air Force have focused on China's military technological capabilities that match

American systems such as aircraft, submarines, carriers, and electronic systems to secure or deny access to the WPTO while ignoring Army capabilities.<sup>47</sup> By focusing on an emerging peer competitor with a technological counterbalancing effort, Army advisors maintain that ASB promulgates the “perception of how wars *ought* to be waged” instead of identifying a rational operational concept.<sup>48</sup>

But if the ASB CONOPS focuses on the balance of power with China and defense of regional allies, what can the Army deliver to maintain regional stability, address proliferation of A2/AD capabilities, and provide forward presence and power projection? Military services, especially the Army, have learned many bitter and hard-fought lessons throughout the durations of OIF and OEF that translated into doctrine, operational designs, and tactical training programs. In light of the previous decade’s operational focus, Army experts argue that the application of ASB is too narrow.

The Army understands these tenets from operational experience. The concept of *AirLand Battle* (ALB), published in August 1982 as Army Field Manual 100-5, *Operations*, “reflected the significance with which the Army, since the early 1970s, had regarded the technological edge that the Soviet Union was gaining in that decade in the tactical weaponry of its numerically stronger forces opposite NATO in Europe.”<sup>49</sup> Specifically, ALB called for early offensive action by both air and land combined with defeating the armored, mechanized, and combined arms of the Soviets to the full depth of enemy formations.<sup>50</sup> The concept pushed the limits of many post-Vietnam era strategies and paved the way for a new approach of thinking outside of the arena of the conventional battlefield. Current Army strategists extract distinct parallels between ALB and ASB while drawing from the well of experience during the past decade.

Finally, many Army leaders are concerned that the difference between a ‘concept of operations’ and ‘operational concept’ may limit the effectiveness of ASB. According to Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, a concept of operations is “a verbal or graphic statement that clearly and concisely expresses what the joint force commander intends to accomplish and how it will be done using available resources.”<sup>51</sup> A CONOPS is designed to encompass a series of linked operations or campaign plans with a common, interconnected goal. Army pundits argue that ASB violates these tenets because it should focus on an ‘operational concept’ without a defined theater of operations or enemy, namely China. Similarly, Army planners propose that ASB should readdress its directive to a forward-thinking, broadly based concept without a specific enemy or theater; by doing otherwise, ASB violates its very purpose.<sup>52</sup>

To support their argument, military scholars highlight previous examples of successful operational concepts that did not predispose an adversary or region such as the 1934 United States Marine Corps (USMC) Tentative Manual for Landing Operations and the USMC Operational Maneuver from the Sea (OMFTS).<sup>53</sup> While many pundits validate the fundamental framework of ASB, they support a generalized focus on sea control and protection of US regional allies.<sup>54</sup> Until these differences are equalized, growing consternation between the services may induce a counterproductive element into an otherwise worthwhile venture.

A second recommendation mandates that military services must readdress and refocus training regimes to align with the joint capabilities required to counter Twenty-First century threats and operate in the restricted environment outlined in ASB. President

Obama stated in the *Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Defense* that US forces must provide a stabilizing presence through “a sustainable pace of presence operations abroad, including rotational deployments and bilateral and multilateral training exercises (which) reinforce deterrence, help to build the capacity and competence of US, allied, and partner forces for internal and external defense, strengthen alliance cohesion, and increase US influence.”<sup>55</sup> In short, armed services must continue to train effectively under the codified theme of joint warfighting alongside coalition partners.

Cohesion between Air Force and Naval powers are paramount towards cooperation and mutual support. Power projection, agile combat support, and rapid global mobility are competencies shared between the Navy and Air Force, albeit in differing capacities. Because of their inherent similarities, these services make natural partners with mutually supportive force providers and combat enablers. A shift in service-centric operations is likewise necessary to exercise with joint and coalition partners. In order to train under a coherent and salient pattern of collaboration, “an institutionalized cadre of officers, planners, and procurement specialists must be put in place. Otherwise, the services will fall back into their familiar patterns of competition.”<sup>56</sup> Naval and Air Forces have trained for years in a myriad of joint Pacific exercises such as COPE WEST, COPE THUNDER, RIMPAC, and VALIANT SHIELD. Large-scale exercises are vital in developing robust relationships with Pacific allies.

Similarly, joint exercises must highlight military operations in a degraded or denied environment. If ASB contends that Chinese A2/AD technologies may affect military operations, the Air Force and Navy must train in an environment with denied

global positioning system (GPS), simulated port or airfield denial, and the negation of power projection associated with threats to aircraft carriers and battleships. AirSea Battle authors noted that “the US military has arguably fallen prey to the assumption that the connectivity underlying US power projection is robust and will always be there. Thus there has been inadequate planning or exercising of operations in denied or degraded connectivity environments.”<sup>57</sup> However inconvenient, the next generation of Pacific military exercises must execute operations using a move/counter-move scenario indicative of Chinese strategy in a denied environment.

For instance, training scenarios must address that rear-area sanctuaries for US forces and logistics depots will be subject to attack via enemy air, surface and subsurface deploying forces; deploying air, ground and naval forces to forward bases and littorals will be vulnerable through similar means; and complex battle network operation and satellite bandwidth is susceptible to anti-satellite, cyber and EW attack.<sup>58</sup> Planners must take these considerations into account when developing military courses of action (COAs) against likely enemy maneuvers. Building upon these partnerships, lessons learned and tactics from past exercises should continue and evolve as ASB develops towards an executable concept of operations.

Finally, the third recommendation for a viable ASB concept involves the translocation and appropriate dispersal of Pacific ports, littoral facilities, and suitable airfields. American forces have historically operated with virtual impunity in the WPTO since the end of World War II, and therefore main operating bases scattered throughout the region remain under-defended against a potential cruise missile or cyber attack. Likewise, assumed sanctuaries and power projection capabilities that have been sheltered

from long-range detection and surveillance will undoubtedly be held at risk in a Sino-American clash. In addition to added conventional force risk, US communications, ISR, and cyberspace capabilities that are dependent on high-bandwidth connectivity to enable target detection, precision strike, and C2 will likely be targeted in a conflict.<sup>59</sup> Chinese A2/AD capabilities coupled with growing technological and military force projection demands that the United States be able to durably counter risks associated with these expanding competencies.

The importance of geostrategic island location is at the heart of ASB. Chinese strategists view two island chains as paramount to China's sphere of influence: the "First Island Chain" runs from the Japanese main islands to the Ryukyus, Taiwan, Philippines, and Borneo.<sup>60</sup> These islands bind the East and South China Seas and extend from the Chinese mainland as a virtual mirror of the coastline. The "Second Island Chain" extends from the Bonin Islands southward through the Marianas, Guam, and the Caroline Islands.<sup>61</sup> These islands border the Philippine Sea between the Western and Southern Pacific Oceans. American military ports and airfields within these island chains, specifically bases in Korea, Guam, and Japan, are all within range of Chinese ballistic missiles and unprepared for a coordinated attack. By contrast, China has at least twenty-seven air bases within the range of Taiwan alone with the advantage of a massive coastline and ports of embarkation.<sup>62</sup> The sheer size and enormity of the WPTO places the United States at a geospatial disadvantage with a premium on allied nations and regional bases.

In light of the many hindrances of WPTO operations, what can the Air Force and Navy do to compensate for the potential lack of sanctuaries and freedom of movement?

In an ideal world, the US would have the capability to expand its own sphere of Pacific influence and build a number of ports and airfields outside of the range of Chinese ballistic missiles while developing an interconnected chain of island harbors and airfields designed to accommodate a wide array of Air Force and Naval craft. The reality cannot be as sanguine based on the fiscal constraints of the world economy and downsizing of the American military infrastructure. The answer lies within cost effective measures to bolster, strengthen, reinforce, and defend the current contingent of island facilities while developing the idea of dispersal basing to surrounding islands.

During the Cold War, the US utilized numerous approaches to ensure asset survivability in the event of a protracted war with the Soviet Union to include highway-runways, concealed operating bases for vertical short-takeoff and landing aircraft, extensive hardening of buildings and facilities, and the ability to execute rapid runway repair.<sup>63</sup> Likewise, the ability to sustain forces into a potentially protracted war and minimize the impact of salvo strikes, cruise missile barrages, and cyber attacks is absolutely crucial to the viability of a counterbalancing concept. In an effort to reduce risk to current port and airfield structure, many of these Cold War-era measures are paramount to ensure survivability.

WPTO port and airfield modernization and defense is critical for an extended conflict and must be freed from budgetary cuts and spending constraints, even in the current fiscal environment. Base dispersal, however, presents an even larger challenge for the ASB concept. While not explicitly outlined in the CONOPS, ASB planners contend that it is necessary to execute “comprehensive aircraft dispersal operations to rear area bases or satellite fields (while) conducting responsive distributed logistics operations to



sustain widely dispersed air operations.”<sup>64</sup> The political challenge becomes not only where the US will disperse, but also to what degree and will the host nation accept the increased risk associated with US force laydown?

Strengthening airfield defense and improving port security at established bases in Japan and Guam represent long-term economic and political challenges. Given the appropriate international coordination and cooperation effort, security enhancements are not insurmountable. In order to remain effective, Pacific island bases must maintain peripatetic and survivable supply routes of equipment maintenance, logistics, and personnel.<sup>65</sup> Dispersal obligations are expensive, create resource shortfalls, and diminish capabilities elsewhere, but are an indispensable requirement when evaluating long-term national strategy in the Pacific.

### ***Geopolitical Realities – Known and Unknown***

Modern warfare involves a complex network of variables that strategists attempt to quantify and evaluate. A counterbalancing concept is the next phase of American planning in the Pacific as troops are reallocated from Iraq and Afghanistan. The current global fiscal environment demands new strategies but increases pressure to already strained joint partnerships. Funds allocated to ASB through defense budgetary means could potentially cannibalize from other vital military programs. In the wake of such a dramatic shift in American foreign policy, the question of regional command relationships becomes apparent.

Like the CONOPS, ASB regional leadership studies are also at the initial planning stages. After establishing focus groups to study regional strategies, Admiral Robert Willard, US PACOM Commander, noted that “it’s presumptive to get into the (ASB)

command relations debate now when the concept is in fledgling development. I need to see where and how it's intended to be adapted, and then we can talk about the command relations.”<sup>66</sup> The synergistic effects of a combined Air Force and Navy military campaign against a regional superpower remain unknown, as do fundamental operational requirements such as logistics flow, basing options, and long-term military basing rights and operations. These points of friction may take years to resolve.

In an effort to quell growing political sentiment that America is planning a large-scale war against China, Admiral Mike Mullen, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, cited the similarities between the United States and PRC. He noted, “We’re both maritime nations with long coastlines and economies dependent on unhindered trade. We both face threats of drug trafficking, piracy and the movement of weapons of mass destruction.”<sup>67</sup> Despite these comparisons, Admiral Mullen continued that “we still don’t see eye-to-eye with China over military operating rights in the South China Sea. We still don’t fully understand China’s justification for the rapid growth in its defense spending or its long-term military modernization goals. And we don’t believe that China should be allowed to resolve disputes in contested waters by coercing smaller nations.”<sup>68</sup> Indeed, Pacific posturing indicates a strong altruistic message with a parallel strengthening of counter A2/AD capabilities, force counterbalance, and power projection sustainment. Admiral Mullen’s testimony is indicative of American resolve and long-term commitment in the WPTO.

Yet by deliberately “naming names” in the ASB concept, many pundits argue that the United States has taken a more hard-lined approach across a myriad of political and military issues into the “peaceful rise” of an emerging peer competitor.<sup>69</sup> Various

analysts have asserted that China is merely expanding its military and political role in the Pacific; opponents of a counterbalancing concept suggest a more pragmatic approach. Specifically, many argue that “it is one thing for the independent thinkers at CSBA to issue a set of reports and conceptual papers on the ASB (concept); it is quite another for Navy and Air Force staffs to collaborate on a comprehensive approach to counter PLA systems, doctrine, and operational plans.”<sup>70</sup> Moreover, many opponents of a counterbalancing strategy have asked a hypothetical question regarding American policies in the Pacific: “What if we’re wrong?”

This question is important and worth framing in historical context. In the wake of the Soviet Union’s collapse, the United States was equipped with a myriad of technologies and military capabilities developed during the Cold War that transcended their intended purposes: the A-10 Thunderbolt II, B-1B Lancer, and B-52 Stratofortress saw incredible success during OPERATION Desert Storm as well as OEF/OIF and are projected to remain in service for many more years; Global Positioning Systems (GPS) and similar satellite technologies were designed to improve navigation capabilities and are extensively used today; finally, a multitude of rotary wing, surface, and subsurface vessels surpassed their projected capabilities and performed with splendid success after the Cold War. If China is indeed the “wrong” enemy, counterbalancing technologies and Pacific port defense measures will serve to reinforce American global security in the coming decades regardless of the adversary.

The current shift to the Pacific region parallels the Cold War in many other ways. While free of the substantial nuclear arsenal build-up, the United States must utilize every instrument of power to counterbalance and contain the perceived threat. Experts in

Chinese strategy convey that “a Pentagon office focused on China’s military challenges... will be insufficient. This challenge will require Cold War levels of strategic, political, and economic policy integration well beyond the Pentagon’s writ.”<sup>71</sup>

Additionally, the United States is pushing to expand its sphere of influence further into the Pacific region in an effort to counterbalance the unfavorable Chinese power conditions in a similar effort to Cold War-era European expansion to counter Soviet presence.

A notable exception to Cold War-style posturing is the lack of nuclear weapons proliferation that characterized the decades long conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. Despite China’s reluctance to publicize its arsenal, the PRC lacks both the volume and delivery capabilities to establish itself as nuclear peer competitor with the United States.<sup>72</sup> In the absence of a nuclear component, the foundation of conventional deterrence in the WPTO may define the next several decades. By linking Cold War policies to the advent of conventional deterrence, the United States is faced with “a theoretical solution to the suicide conundrum that lurked undeniably at the dark heart of (the Cold War).”<sup>73</sup>

The United States has made it clear that it does not seek to instigate conflict with China or promulgate bellicose posturing. Likewise, CSBA strategists maintain that America will not prompt hostilities or even support containment, but rather offset “the PLA’s unprovoked and unwarranted military buildup (and) minimize Beijing’s incentives to achieve its geopolitical ambitions through aggression or, more likely, coercion.”<sup>74</sup> A counterbalancing concept serves to solidify policies for a long-term American presence in the Pacific to moderate the uprising of a growing regional superpower.

## *Conclusion*

When faced with the growing storm of the Civil War that threatened to tear the United States apart, President Abraham Lincoln spoke to Congress during his December 1862 annual message and said, “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew.”<sup>75</sup> Today’s world is marred with much of the same strife and uncertainty. In the wake of the current global financial crisis, a more contemporary quotation from Sir Ernest Rutherford is appropriate: “Gentlemen, we have run out of money. It’s time to start thinking.”<sup>76</sup>

A counterbalancing concept is a critical step in maintaining the political and military balance in the Western Pacific region, and ASB must continue to develop in order to meet the complex needs of Pacific stability. Although not a measure to create tension or war with the PRC, ASB demands that the United States seize, sustain, and exploit the initiative in all warfighting domains while maintaining enduring partnerships with regional allies.<sup>77</sup> Success of a counterbalancing concept requires careful and ongoing cooperation between Naval and Air Forces even with modifications in the US defense program, force structure, and force posture. Commonalities between the services enhance a reflective partnership despite economic, cultural, and logistical challenges. In order to ensure the sustainment of the ASB concept, planners must carefully weigh economic constraints with military necessities.

China’s rise to power and regional dominance represent an ongoing threat to the power projection and force sustainment capabilities of the United States. AirSea Battle is a flawed but important concept of operations designed to counterbalance emerging

Chinese A2/AD while synergizing the combined power of American military forces. Enduring strategic success is contingent on a number of recommendations designed to capitalize on the strengths and experiences of the armed services over the past decade. These recommendations include an integrated Army presence in the WPTO, a thorough multi-service and coalition training plan that emphasizes a denied or degraded environment, and dispersed Pacific island bases with cost effective and robust port and airfield protection measures.

As of May 2012, the AirSea Battle concept is complete and awaiting Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta's signature. Washington's willingness to invest in ASB's long-term concept by counterbalancing Chinese A2/AD capabilities and proliferating American technological initiatives will determine eventual success. Particularly, power projection capabilities and resources that counter Chinese systems such as attack submarines, robust battle networks, and long-range strike systems must be shielded from budget cuts.<sup>78</sup> The Cold War gave rise to important military technologies still in use today, and while deterrence ostensibly eliminated the possibility of nuclear war, heightened tension and the possibility of large-scale conflict existed as a result of the competition between two peer competitors. The shadow of the Cold War exists in the framework of a counterbalance concept, but with careful and measured application of the strategic and operational aspects of AirSea Battle, the United States and its allies can safeguard a stabilized balance of power in the Pacific region.

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